

## **Concerns raised about adequacy of military protection**

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The Marine Corps and other branches of the military have stepped up their preparations for biological or chemical weapons in the event of a conflict with Iraq.

There is, however, skepticism about the adequacy and availability of the U.S. military's equipment.

Marine officials and some defense analysts say biochemical equipment and training have vastly improved since the 1991 Persian Gulf War, when they were found to be largely deficient.

But federal agencies and analysts are worried about the military's supplies of protective equipment and whether training reflects actual battlefield conditions.

A General Accounting Office report in October said 250,000 biochemical suits are defective and unaccounted for in the Army's huge inventory system.

The GAO also said the Pentagon doesn't have enough protective suits for all contingencies and

that the supply problem will only get worse. In its report, the federal accounting agency said the Marines have less than 50 percent of the required stock of protective boots ready to go, about half the needed gloves and about 75 percent of the jackets and pants.

The GAO also contends that the new JSLIST suits -Joint Service Lightweight Integrated Suit Technology aren't replacing the older ones as quickly as planned. That means the suit inventory may drop below minimal needs in five years.

Meanwhile, the Defense Logistics Agency recently confirmed that 80,000 gas masks with the wrong gaskets were issued to the armed services - including some to the Navy and Marines - and that 19,000 are still in circulation. A Marine Corps spokesman said the service is searching its inventory for them.

"I am concerned that Pentagon officials may be downplaying the actual risks to our servicemen and women, particularly with respect to the preparedness of our forces for chemical and biological attacks," said Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), a member of the national security subcommittee of the Committee on Government Reform.

Subcommittee Chairman Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), said, "When we go into Iraq, the Pentagon needs to be absolutely certain no one will be told their mask can't be fixed because the (Defense Department) bought the wrong-size gasket. This breakdown of the procurement system also speaks to the larger issue of chem-bio defense readiness," he added. "Chemical officers continue to tell the subcommittee (that) commanders do not give CB (chemical and biological) defense a high priority."

Lt. Gen. Michael Hagee, the incoming Marine Corps commandant, expressed confidence in the Marines' biochemical defense training and with its supply of protective suits.

"Over the past year or so we've looked very carefully at our individual protective equipment to ensure that we have sufficient quantities, which we do, and that it's in good shape, which it is," Hagee said. "We are ready to fight whenever the president decides that it's time to fight."

The Marine Corps uses a layered system called the Mission Oriented Protective Posture suit.

The jacket and pants are made of chemical-resistant synthetic fibers. The gas mask and

shoulder-length hood allow each Marine to breathe safely in a contaminated area. Rubber galoshes go on over combat boots, and rubber gloves cover the hands.

With every layer on, Marines are supposed to be protected for up to 24 hours. Infantry Marines from Camp Pendleton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, recently began "Gas Mask Wednesdays," requiring 20,000 troops to wear or at least carry their protective masks all day and to practice about 12 hours every three months in the full suit, said Chief Warrant Officer Philip Ross, the battalion's specialist in nuclear, biological and chemical defense. The minimum requirement for infantrymen is four hours per quarter.

Training allows them to get used to the intense heat - up to 110 degrees - inside the cumbersome gear, which also constricts vision and makes movement slower and harder.

Ross compares learning to fight in the suit to a football player learning to play in pads and gear. "The more you're in it, the easier it comes," he said.